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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

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PSYCHOLOGY TEACHERS UPDATE

Psychology Teachers Update is designed to give a brief overview of the main developments in the different areas of psychology. There is a proliferation of journals and research, and it is very difficult to keep abreast of the latest trends, particularly in the many and varied areas of psychology.

Each issue of Psychology Teachers Update will cover a particular topic, and summarise the main research directions and findings in the last ten to fifteen years approximately. The aim is to give teachers the feel of what is happening in that area of psychology.

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Introduction

In recent years, a number of authors (eg: Elms 1975) have suggested that psychology is in "crisis". The "crisis", which appeared more in social psychology, revolves around two key issues (Hogg and Vaughan 1995).

i) Psychology was predominantly reductionist - ie: complex behaviour explained by simplistic explanations.

ii) Psychology was predominantly positivistic - the experimental/scientific method was the dominant research method.

Within the history of scientific psychology, the traditional scientific method has become an issue; particularly the claim of neutral value-free science. But the truth is that "accounts of the world are inseparable from broader social practices" (Gergen 1994 p427).

New approaches came to focus on the accounts that people gave of their actions (ie: the meaning they attached to them). What could be called the "insider's view". The belief that the researcher had privileged access to the "real behaviour" was questioned, and eventually also, the neutrality of research. The researcher used the same social processes (and biases) to interpret the research data as individuals in everyday life. The most important aspect of this process was language.

From the desire to look in new areas (ie away from the main traditions of the lab-experimental approach) has come social constructionism.

Gergen (1994) shows that in its short history social constructionism has concentrated on three lines of inquiry.

a) The construction of reality through language and discourse.

b) The processes by which individuals come to understand the world.

c) The development of accounts of human action based within a relational and social context.

Social constructionism can be seen as the movement from the search for "'psychological truth' to the social processes in which such truths are embedded and the relational functions that they serve" (Gergen 1994 p429).

"It argues that persons can only be properly understood in terms of their social practices and ways of thinking and being which constitute their particular

society" (Stevens 1996 p30).

Burr (1995; quoted in Humphreys 1997) makes a number of distinctions between social constructionism and "mainstream psychology". Social constructionism is:

i) Anti-essentialist with no concern with "hidden" essences in the head, like attitudes or the self ¹.

ii) Anti-realist because there are no facts, just meanings.

iii) Concerned with the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge.

iv) Viewing language as a pre-condition for thought.

v) Viewing language as a form of social action.

vi) Focusing on interactional and social processes.

vii) Focusing on processes rather than static psychology.

MAIN "PRINCIPLES" OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism is not really based on a fixed set of principles - it is "more properly considered as a continuously unfolding conversation in which various positions may be occupied, elaborated, or vacated as the dialogue proceeds" (Gergen 1994 p427).

However, four main "principles" can be summarised.

1. The crucial importance of culture and social practices in the understanding of behaviour.

For example, if the people of a particular culture at a particular point in their history subscribe to the views that humans are inherently animalistic and violent, and furthermore that these are primarily properties of the males of the species, their actions will consequently make it so
(Cardwell and Humphreys 1998 p5).

2. The transmission of culture and social practices through language, which is not neutral but value laden. Thus the need to focus on language used in interactions

¹ "Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (Fuss 1989 pxi).

(for example through discourse analysis).

3. The research methodology chosen is thus different from the experiment in the main; because the experimental situation is itself a social construction not a vacuum. It is better to accept the bias inherent in research and listen to the participants themselves. So we see the use of what is classed as "qualitative" methods of research.

4. Studying the individual cannot take place outside their social environment, even for behaviours like memory, which may appear to be within the individual, and relatively independent of society. This approach has become known associated with "Sociological Social Psychology" (SSP)(Still 1996). It also makes reference to what some would see as sociological issues (eg: power in society).

Furthermore, any attempt to understand knowledge outside the cultural/social context is not possible - "there are only situated knowledges" (Stevens and Wetherell 1996).

The social constructionist approach has implications for our understanding of reality. Reality is socially constructed, not pre-existent, and it is also multiple. There is no single "truth". This is relativism. "Relativists, in general, are happy to live with the idea that their own claims to knowledge are constructed" (Wetherell and Still 1996 p112).

The Role of Culture and Social Practice

For the social constructionist approach, behaviour is shaped and reshaped from interactions with others, and by cultural and social practices. Thus the majority of behaviours are "constructed" by the meaning placed on them in the social context of a particular time and place. Behaviours do not simply exist because we perform them; they exist because they have been created in the social context.

"The person, consciousness, mind and the self are seen as social through and through" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p222).

For Bruner (1990) it is culture, not biology, that places constraints upon, and shapes our behaviour.

When we enter human life, it is as if we walk on stage into a play whose enactment is already in progress - a play whose somewhat open plot determines what parts we may play and toward what denouements we may be heading. Others on stage already have a sense of what the play is about, enough of a sense to make negotiation with a newcomer possible (p34).

Bruner also talks about "folk psychology" - the idea that every culture has its own beliefs about what is normal - "how human beings 'tick', what our own and other minds are like, what one can expect situated actions to be like, what are possible modes of life, how one commits oneself to them, and so on" (Bruner 1990 p35).

However, biology may play a part in that Bruner believes this is a predisposition to organise experiences into a linear and structured form (known as a "narrative").

Great emphasis is placed upon "narrative" in the process of social constructionism. It is the way we describe our behaviour and the events around us, to ourselves and to others. This process is not neutral, and "narrative" has a particular aim. For example, to maintain our sense of consistency over time.

As children are growing, "narratives" are used to explore the self, and others within a cultural context. On top of this process, individuals collaborate in their "narratives", and "negotiate" the meaning of a situation.

"Narratives" develop through the processes of "framing" and "affect regulation". The former shows how the experience is divided up and stored in the memory. An early example of this process could be Bartlett's "War of

the Ghost" research. A story which was unusual to the American participants was later recalled as if a typical American story.

But this process is not individual; it involves storing the information in memory based on the sharing of memory within a culture (Shotter 1990).

The second process of "affect regulation" is based on the premise that memories are linked to "affects" (attitudes). It is this "affect" that is the basis of recalling a memory. But more than that: - "The recall is then a construction made largely on the basis of this attitude, and its general effect is that of a justification of the attitude" (Bartlett 1932 quoted in Bruner 1990 p58). Thus the process of simply storing a memory is not objective, but influenced by culture.

Take, for example, a study by Harris, Sardarpour-Bascom and Meyer (1989). Three short stories were compiled about planning a date ("Evening Out"), lunch hour ("Work Day"), and the first day at university ("School Day"). Two versions of each story were produced; identical except for a few details consistent with the culture of the USA or Mexico. For example, in the Mexican version of "Evening Out", the girl had a chaperone. The participants were undergraduates from the USA who read one of the two versions of the stories. Their recall was tested 30 minutes, and then two days later.

Recall after two days tended to see the Mexican version like the American version. The authors concluded that "the appropriate cultural schemas were clearly operating here, most likely in the sense of directing retrieval processes" (Harris et al 1989 p95).

The social constructionist approach takes into account the life history of the individual (the "narratives" of that individual), and social history ("the cumulative effects of group processes, institutions, social structures and social divisions over time" - Wetherell 1996a p300).

The most obviously quoted example is of a person's position in the class system of their society. However, it is too simple to suggest that individuals are determined by this. The position in the class system is abstract; this becomes real to the individual through the experiences that derive from that position. For example, an individual in poverty will experience hardship, and this is the experience that is real in the "narratives" of the individual.

This will take place in the context of status, attention, and the social hierarchy. In other words, an individual's position in the social hierarchy is

continually being reinforced (Brewer 2002a).

As people live their lives they are continually making themselves as characters or personalities through the ways in which they reconcile and work with the raw materials of their social situation (Wetherell 1996a p305).

Connell (1987) sees the formation of the individual's social identity as "projects"; ie: information is collected from many sources over time, with the ultimate aim of a unified "narrative". Thus it is possible that there may be contradictions because individuals are both active and passive in this construction process. This whole process needs to be seen in the context of power relations in society (eg: between men and women).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL

If most behaviour of the individual now is constructed, then they must have arrived at this point somehow. It is important to note that during child development, the individual is active in the construction process. This is distinct from Behaviourism where the individual is passive, and is simply a product of stimulus-response (SR).

Individuals are born with different temperaments, and mental capacities, but these differences are then worked upon by social practices, and meaning is then placed upon them.

Much of the traditional work on socialisation processes tends to see behaviour that is learnt as being imposed on the child from the outside; ie: "how the 'outside' - cultural beliefs, values and so - is brought to the 'inside' - the child's inner cognitive, emotional and imaginative development" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 pp247-8). Again to emphasise that within social constructionism, the process is active through language. An important term used is "negotiation" to emphasise the interactive nature of development.

Two key developmental psychologists are linked into these ideas - George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and Lev Vygotsky (1902-1936)

G.H.MEAD

Mead believed that the self is not a structure, but a process (not organised but reflexive), which acts and

responds to itself. Thus it is possible that there are many selves, some more important than others. The person is not just a mere responder to internal/external influences, but acts towards their world, interprets what happens, and organises actions on the basis of it. Knowledge of the self and others develops simultaneously, both dependent on social interaction.

The direction of development for Mead is from social to individual, through language. Crucial to this process is interaction with others, which help the child take on the perspectives of others. This, for Mead, is the process of the development of the self. This takes three stages:

i) "Preparatory stage" - initially the child's motivation revolves around basic biological drives, but soon they learn to respond to others (eg: crying brings attention).

ii) "Play stage" - the child learns to try out other perspectives by the use of role-playing.

iii) "Game stage" - children are now able to organise multiple simultaneous roles in relation to their self. This ability when finalised becomes the "generalised other" (the combined attitudes of a whole social group).

Thus thought can be seen as a dialogue between the spontaneous "I" and the "me" (based on the "generalised other"). This process though is dynamic, and continues in different contexts.

LEV VYGOTSKY

Vygotsky also believed that the direction of development is from social to individual, but with greater emphasis on language than Mead.

Vygotsky believed that the "individual response emerges from the forms of collective life" (1981b quoted in Wertsch 1985 p59). Furthermore, he says:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category (quoted in Wertsch pp60-1).

This process is known as internalisation. But the

process is more than just the child reproducing a copy of external behaviour internally; by the process of internalisation, the child's internal structures are transformed. There is not a consciousness waiting for the arrival of external information, but "consciousness is a product of society" (Leont'ev 1981 quoted in Wertsch 1985 p63).

Wertsch (1985) quotes Vygotsky's example of the development of pointing in young children. Initially the young child is grasping unsuccessfully for an object; the adult responds to this movement by placing meaning upon it as pointing. The grasping becomes transformed into pointing firstly for others, and then lastly it becomes meaningful to the child.

We can summarise the main points of the process of internalisation (Wertsch 1985) as:

i) It is not merely copying of the external reality into the internal, but is the formation of internal reality.

ii) It is the external reality that matters is social interaction.

Egocentric speech is not a primitive form of speech that disappears as the child becomes social, but is a critical step in the tradition from purely social speech (beginning at birth) to inner speech and thought.

Children come to internalise dialogues which they see in the society around; but the language they use carries with it the social and cultural trappings of the context. This dialogue is at the social level first, then becomes internalised as part of the individual cognitive processes.

It has been suggested that this social construction of the child's cognitive development allows for the idea that the "mind" extends beyond the individual. For example, children working together to solve a problem that an individual could not.

Importance of Language

One way to see language is as a neutral communication code where A passes information to B and vice versa. Within social constructionism is the idea of discursive psychology, and the study of discourse.

Defining "discourse" can be difficult. Parker (1992) defines it as a "system of statements which construct an object" (p5). For Potter and Wetherell (1987), it is "all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds" (p7). Iniquez (1997) prefers "a set of statements the production conditions of which can be defined" (p149).

But it can mean a number of things to different writers - for some, it is all forms of talk and writing; others see it as the "historically developing, linguistic practices" (Potter and Wetherell 1987). Generally though, we will see it as all spoken interaction and written texts.

Not all discourses are given equal weighting and attention:

Some discourses or constructions of the world are so familiar that they appear as "common sense". If these discourses are deconstructed or taken apart it becomes possible to see how certain dominant ideologies have become "taken-for-granted", and from this point consideration can be given to alternative discourses.. (Marshall 1992 p202).

Language is seen as a social process itself, rather than just a means of communication. For example, the words chosen are not neutral but tell us something about the social world.

Wetherell and Maybin (1996) give three features of language use which challenge the assumption that language is neutral:

i) Language has an "action orientation" - utterances state information, and perform an action. In an argument, individuals are not just stating opposite facts, but are using language to justify their position and undermine the other's. We are doing something with our utterances.

ii) Language is part of the social world - rather than language simply telling us about the social world; it is a "constitutive part of those actions, events and situations" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p244).

iii) Indexical property of discourse - all language is defined by the context of its use.

The whole emphasis is away from language as referring to objects "out there" to the idea that language is about building the social reality. The same event can be described in a number of different ways. It is always possible to see how the choice of words can influence the whole understanding of an event. For example, during a news report, the use of words like "murdered", "killed", "slaughtered" - all set the context for understanding the perpetrators as good or bad. Potter and Wetherell (1987) use the example of "terrorist" or "freedom fighter". Taken a step further, with our language we are also defining ourselves.

Interactions involving language are negotiations where the participants are using their language carefully to establish the meaning of the situation (for example, to show that they are blameless in an argument), and consequently to set the meaning of themselves. Wetherell and Maybin (1996) call this the "double property of talk".

Furthermore, learning to use language is more than just learning the grammar. It involves becoming a "competent speaker"; ie: how to speak in different contexts.

A very important aspect of language as constructing the individual is the concept of "identity positions" (Harre and Van Langenhove 1991). These are similar to social roles, but more dynamic and changing. When an individual is involved in interaction, there are possible locations ("positions") that are being taken - first order, second order, and third order.

- EG (1) A says "get my tea"
 B replies "no, I'm not your servant"
 (2) Later B tells C "A is always demanding things"

What is important is not just what is said, but the implicit meanings involved.

(1) A's statement is first order positioning; they are establishing the social situation: ie: that they believe they have the right to demand their tea. There is an implicit power inequality within the interaction. But B's response is questioning this right; ie: B is attempting to position A as a person without that right to demand (second order positioning).

(2) B's telling of the event to another is third order positioning; ie: A is repositioned as demanding and thoughtless.

This also means that meanings can be contested between speakers as an interaction proceeds (Cooper and

Kaye 2002).

During life, particularly within the family situations, many positions are repeated, and individuals come to "invest" in certain positions (Holloway 1984). Individuals will also have an "interpretative repertoire": "The sum of different discourses, and the ways that they can be combined and mixed together, which the individual has at their disposal to construct subject positions" (Cooper and Kaye 2002 p101).

Burr (1995) sees "interpretative repertoires" like moves of a ballet dancer: a finite number available that are put together in different ways.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis focuses on language, which:

..is no longer seen as simply a reflection of "reality" but as playing an active part in constructing versions of the social world and how people make sense and act in that social world (Marshall 1992 p202).

Discourses fulfill a number of functions:

i) At an interpersonal level, they are used to explain and attribute causes of behaviour.

ii) They have a "political" function of setting out norms and standards against which behaviour is judged. Petkova (1995) uses the example of labelling many women as witches in the Middle Ages as justification for continuing exploitation of them.

iii) Discourses maintain differences between categories of people by making the similarities between these categories invisible and the differences visible. Petkova (1995) argues that today PMS is used, instead of witchcraft, to explain "unusual" (eg: aggressive) behaviour of women, while still reaffirming the stereotype of them as "feminine" (not aggressive).

The aim of discourse analysis is to study the entire discourse - "what is said, in what way, by whom and for what purpose" (Hogg and Vaughan 1995 p509).

Wetherell and Potter (1992) believe that discourse analysis focuses on the "activities of justification, rationalization, categorization, attribution, making sense, naming, blaming and identifying" which are "quintessential psychological activities" (p2).

Potter and Wetherell (1987) have shown that the way individuals construct their arguments can be used to show the underlying social assumptions. This is the focus on rhetoric.

Discourse analysis has been used in other disciplines before its arrival in psychology, and is a development on the technique of content analysis. It is based on the "description of the recurrently used words, phrases and linguistic devices which categorise and reproduce the social world" (Parker 1992 p83).

Potter and Wetherell (1995) highlight six central themes with the use of discourse analysis.

i) Practices and resources - the aim is to look at "what people do with their talk and writing" (p81) (known as discourse practices), and the resources used to achieve this aim (the categories and interpretative repertoires used).

ii) Construction and description - this is the study of "how people assemble (versions of) the world in the course of their interactions" (p81).

iii) Content - this is the focus on what is said.

iv) Rhetoric - within discourse are inbuilt "argumentative organisations"; ie: what is said is in reference to an imaginary counter-argument.

v) Stake and accountability - within discourse analysis, people are treated as having an interest (stake) in their actions. In practice, there are no "objective" statements.

vi) Cognition in action - it is more important to study what is actually said rather than what may be individual's cognitive attitudes.

Potter and Wetherell (1995) analysed interviews with white New Zealanders about their views of the Maoris. Two main views of "Maori culture" were highlighted. They are what the authors call "culture-as-heritage" and "culture-as-therapy". The first type sees the "Maori culture" as "something to be preserved and treasured" (p89). Thus the aim is to "freeze" the group in the past, and invalidate the contemporary situation.

The second type sees "Maori culture" as a psychological need. For example, Maoris have created their own problems by not being "fully rooted" in their culture. Both views are used to disempower the Maoris. The highlighting of such processes is an important part

of discourse analysis.

Parker and Burman (1993) detail thirty-two problems with discourse analysis. The most important being that language (ie: discourse) is treated as the most powerful constraint on behaviour, and this constraint can be simply analysed by a researcher. "There is more variability in human action and expression than that expressed in language; as researchers we construct our own image of the world when we reconstruct 'discourses'; and we have some responsibility for how our analysis will function" (Banister et al 1994 p106).

DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The ideas within discourse analysis as a method have been developed further in discursive psychology (a sub-branch of social constructionism).

Discursive psychology is based on three principles (Potter 1996):

a) Construction - the individual's version of the world is constructed through practical interactions as if it is independent of the individual.

b) Action - speaking is seen as action, and this is what is studied, not thought.

c) Rhetoric - talk is "used" to make a point, to counter a real or imagined argument. Whatever is said always has the alternative in mind.

However, if what people say is too obviously countering another view, and is seen as an attempt to influence, it will be discounted as a "stake". An individual holds a particular attitude because it is to their interest. For example, company managers believe that unions hinder progress. The reaction is very much - "they would say that, wouldn't they?"

This is obviously important in advertising. If individuals are to be persuaded to buy certain products, they must not immediately switch off because of "stake". One way around this problem is "stake inoculation". This is a technique to "prevent a claim being undermined as a product of stake" (Potter 1996 p165).

For example, a celebrity endorsing a product is portrayed as initially sceptical about the product's claims, and then is won over. The point of the initial scepticism is to counter the argument - "you would say that you're being paid to say so" of the celebrity.

It is interesting to see these processes at work within the adult film and sex industries. Much emphasis is placed upon pointing out that the women involved want to appear in such films or to be doing such activities. For example, in an advert for "sex lines", the woman in the picture says "I just love to get off over the phone" (Brewer 2001a).

In the Channel Four documentary, "Censored: Boogie Nights in Suburbia" (1999), it interviews men involved in recruiting and filming women for UK adult films. The speakers are at great pains to emphasise a number of points which counter existing arguments (ie: discourses of the exploitation of women). For example:

a) Women choose to take part; eg: "Michael" (agent) says "nobody forced because others will do it" and "if the girls didn't like it, they wouldn't do it".

b) The men involved do not make money; eg: "Peter" and "Henry", who go around photographing women in their homes, emphasise that they don't make much money from it, and it is only the publishers who do.

What is said are not statements of facts, but using language to counter criticisms and "position" themselves as not exploiters of women. This is part of convincing others and constructing the self (self-justification of their behaviour) in relation to the norms and values of society.

Use of Qualitative Methods

Even the methods used by social constructionists are different to the traditional in psychology. Social constructionism is particularly critical of the traditional "objective" methods of scientific psychology. The idea that all knowledge about human behaviour has been collected in a precise, "untainted" (by human bias) way.

Gergen (1985) details the assumptions of social constructionism, which highlight the antithesis to scientific psychology.

(a) What we take to be knowledge is not a product of hypothesis-testing.

(b) The terms of understanding the world are social artefacts; ie: products of "historically situated interchanges among people" (p267).

(c) A particular explanation prevails because of the social process not "empirical validity" (p268).

Social constructionists are challenging the dominance of the experiment - and in particular two issues - (i) the universality of human behaviour and thus the generalizability of experiments, and (ii) the neutrality of the method used.

Gergen (1994) highlights the main challenge from the social construction movement towards traditional methodology:

a) Practical Empiricism - research claiming theories that predict behaviour in the future are of limited objectivity. Rather methods should be used to assess current conditions, and "to draw trend lines for deliberating the future" (p428).

b) Conceptual Innovation - a shift from the isolation of the lab to study "real situations", and to understand the role of language within that situation. But more than that, psychology should benefit society (rather than just "scholarly inquiry").

c) Valuable Reflection - research should have a "moral" element in that it is concerned with what "ought to be" in society rather than simply describing "what is". "By elucidating common assumptions, investigators hope people may be emancipated from the taken for granted" (p428).

The traditional method has attempted to remove the experimenter from the research, to place the individual in an "experimental vacuum", and claim objective discoveries. Qualitative researchers accept that the research exists in a context, and involves an interaction between researcher and subject. The researcher will also be making interpretations. There is no claim at objectivity.

Any piece of research is faced by three "methodological horrors" according to Woolgar (1988):

i) Indexicality - any explanation of behaviour is tied to a specific occasion. In other words, generalization is very difficult. Qualitative research is interested in the findings in that specific situation for their own value.

ii) Inconcludability - research data will change as less control over the extraneous variables occur. This has encouraged attempts at an "experimental vacuum" - the attempted isolation of everything except the specific behaviour of the participant being studied. Qualitative researchers accept that this isolation is not possible.

iii) Reflexivity - the researcher studies themselves as they make the interpretation of the data - subjectivity is encouraged. "Research is always carried out from a particular standpoint, and the pretence to neutrality in many quantitative studies in psychology is disingenuous" (Banister et al 1994 p13).

Furthermore, added to all these "methodological horrors" is the simple fact that studying an individual changes or affects them. There is no pure, untainted "real" behaviour to get at.

A number of methods could be classed as qualitative as used by social constructionists - unstructured observations, ethnography, discourse analysis, action research, and feminist research. The most important is the unstructured open interview.

This is sometimes called "new paradigm" research (Reason and Rowan 1981).

Sociological Aspects of Social Constructionism

For social constructionists, individual psychology cannot be understood without being aware of the sociological issues or variables. The most important are social class, gender, ethnicity, and age (Bradley 1996).

ISSUE OF POWER IN RELATIONSHIPS

One issue which traditional psychologists have ignored is that of power. Within society, not all individuals are equal, and possess the same power. In certain social contexts, the situation is shaped by powerful discourses; this is the way language used "orders and evaluates knowledge and experience in relation to deeply held beliefs and values" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996 p262).

Furthermore, within the discourses individuals are "positioned" in different ways (ie: the role that they are given or take in a particular social context). For example, the use of "client" rather than "patient" within the mental health system establishes different discourses on the relationship between "therapist" or "doctor".

The issue of power comes to the forefront when trying to understand gender development, and the power structures within modern society (which includes "patriarchy"). How men and women come to understand their masculinity and femininity must be seen in the context that some groups and individuals within society have more power (control) than others.

For example, Connell (1995) argues that "men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command" (quoted in Wetherell 1996 p333). This simple observation at a macro-level can be seen in the individual psychology at the micro-level in, for example, the observation that men tend to dominate conversations more than women, and in the differing interaction and non-verbal behaviours.

LIVING IN A CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Much psychological research has accepted that society (environment) influences the development of the self/personality, but specifically social constructionism emphasises the economic organisation of society (ie: capitalism in the West). This can be particularly applied to the development of the male identity, for example.

The traditional male characteristics of competitiveness and aggressiveness can be seen as a direct product of such an economic system.

Furthermore, it is possible to see different types of male identity rooted in different experiences of work - the traditional distinction between the factory floor and the management offices, for example.

Researchers like Tolson (1977) and Seidler (1991) have shown how the simple difference between where one works within the company hierarchy can be crucial in understanding the male identity, and their whole lives and relationships. So, for example, the subordination that the traditional factory floor ("working-class") male feels can lead to compensation of "an exaggerated masculine culture.. and the desire to dominate and gain recognition at home" (Wetherell 1996 p329).

While Brewer (2001b) has argued that "consumer capitalism" (the current version of capitalism in the West) is a good starting point to understanding the social construction of the self. One of the key characteristics of "consumer capitalism" is the need for continued ever-increasing economic growth by selling more consumer products in already saturated markets. The processes involved here (eg advertising and the pressure to buy more) are crucial in the social construction of the individual.

Social Construction of the Self

The common assumptions of the self are as follows (according to Wetherell and Maybin 1996):

i) Self contained mind - an individual has a self-contained mind, which makes them unique and separate to others.

ii) Consistent personality - each person has one personality seen in a consistent set of traits that makes up their "true" nature.

iii) Private thoughts - individuals own their private and organized thoughts and feelings; though these may be expressed publicly.

iv) "Realising" individual - individuals are the centre of their experience, and try to "realise" themselves (ie: realise their plans, beliefs, attitudes) through their actions.

Taking these four assumptions together, it is suggested that the individual is self-contained, consistent, independent, unitary and private. Any effect of society is passing and relatively unimportant.

The social constructionist approach challenges each of these four assumptions in the way that it sees the self as existing.

i) Self contained mind - because we are self contained in terms of our bodies, (ie: we are physically separate from others), it is assumed that we are isolated from society. But the way we see ourselves is a product of society. The mind, as we know it to ourselves, is better seen as "a line momentarily and arbitrarily drawn around pieces of the public world" (Wetherell and Maybin 1996).

So for example, we look at ourselves and our personal ambitions as private to ourselves, but these ambitions are a mirror of the ambitions created in society. To see personal development as a linear progression is a product of capitalist society/Western thinking.

ii) Consistent personality - attempts have been made to establish the consistency of personality across time and situations. We feel ourselves that we are consistent - we remember past behaviours which appear similar to our behaviours now. But for the social constructionist approach, the self is "distributed" (ie: it exists in more than one solitary place). Bruner sees it as "the sum

and swarm of participations in social life" (quoted in Wetherell and Maybin 1996).

Thus we are talking about "selves"; that is not to say that we do not carry certain consistencies with us based on our temperament. But most of all there is not a "true self" out there to be found. The self is always located in the situation in which the individual is existing. Identity is multi-faceted, but based on key relational settings. It is the relations within the situations that create the self.

Feelings of a consistent self are created by the personal narratives individuals use. These narratives are used to establish connections between life events, and between places as individuals move. Taylor and Wetherell (1999) interviewed New Zealanders living in Britain and found that home (ie: New Zealand) was created as frozen in time, and this played a particular role in the individual's personal narratives. New Zealand is "reified as a valued possession to be protected from others".

iii) Private thoughts - It would seem obvious that we have our own private thoughts which we can express if we want with language in the public domain. But even this private part is influenced by the society around us.

A good example comes from the experiences of Dorinne Kondo (1990) in Japan. She was born in the USA but is of Japanese-American origin. She went to study in Japan for a period of time, and lived among local families. Because of her appearance as Japanese in everyday life, she was treated as Japanese. She tells how after a period of time, she started to "lose" herself. So powerful were the social forces that came into her private thoughts and influenced her self perception (as well as her own behaviour). Kondo reports the realisation that she had changed, that she had become immersed in the new culture.

As I glanced into the shiny metal surface of the butcher's display case, I noticed someone who looked terribly familiar: a typical young housewife, clad in slip-on sandals and the loose, cotton shift called 'home wear'...a woman walking with a characteristically Japanese bend to the knees and a sliding of the feet. Suddenly I clutched the handle of the stroller to steady myself as a wave of dizziness washed over me, for I realised I had caught a glimpse of nothing less than my own reflection (Kondo 1990 p20).

This is a slightly different example because most people do not experience such a change, but it does highlight the way social practices become part of our private selves.

iv) "Realising" individuals - Individuals may have plans, but these exist within a social framework. The process of "realising" is a conspiracy or collaboration. Shotter (1993) talks about "joint action" which simultaneously positions all actions and individuals. So one individual's plans cannot exist separate to others, and in interacting with those others, it helps realise the individual. It is not possible to define oneself alone because it includes other's definitions within the same situation. Thus individual realisations exist within the constraints of situations.

However to talk about "joint action" in the situation does not mean that all individuals are equal in that situation; this is where, for example the issue of power is important.

It seems that following the arguments here, the individual is "made up" of many selves, and does not really have any "core self". That is not completely true. Mauss (1985) proposed the distinction between "Moi" and "Personne". The former is a universal sense of being conscious, which is based on biology. While "Personne" is that part of the self which is "culturally specific".

"POST-MODERN SELF" ²

If the self is a social product, then it will change as society changes. It has been argued that the West is now a "post-modern society". So there must be a "post-modern self".

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century is seen as somehow different to the time that went before. The greater complexity of society, the ever-increasing influence of the media, and new technologies. Gergen (1991) argued, at the beginning of the 1990s, that these changes have produced a "saturated self", which lives in the moment, and in the present "characterised by struggle or contradiction and incoherence" (Docherty 1993).

WHAT IS THE "POST-MODERN"?

Before it is possible to answer the question of what is the "post-modern self", it is necessary to attempt to define "post-modern". This task is not without difficulty.

"Post-modern" exists in the context of the "modern",

² This section is an extract from Brewer (2001c).

which is also open to debate. Haralambos and Holborn (2000) mention four characteristics of "modern" society: faith in progress, in science to solve problems, in the rational; and in the perfection of humanity.

The grand narrative of the modernist program assumed a logical and ordered universe whose laws could be uncovered by science. As the knowledge of these laws accumulated, it could be used to benefit humankind and eventually lead to the emancipation of humanity from poverty, sickness, and class and political servitude (Polkinghorne 1992 p147).

"Post-modern" challenges all of this.

"Post-modern" is a commonly used term today, but it is an "amorphous thing": "The term itself hovers uncertainly in most current writings between - on the one hand - extremely complex and difficult philosophical senses, and - on the other - an extremely simplistic mediation as a nihilistic, cynical tendency in contemporary culture" (Docherty 1993 p1).

Polkinghorne (1992) lists the themes of "post-modern thought" as:

i) Foundationlessness - there are no universals; "no sure epistemological foundation upon which knowledge can be built".

ii) Fragmentariness - reality is "a disunited, fragmented accumulation of disparate elements and events.

iii) Constructivism - there is no world "out there" to discover, all knowledge is constructed; "human experience consists of meaningful interpretations of the real".

iv) Neopragmatism - the criteria for understanding are not whether knowledge corresponds to reality, because this cannot be known in the "post-modern" world. Rather it is whether knowledge "functions successfully in guiding human action to fulfil intended purposes".

WHAT IS THE "POST-MODERN SELF"?

From a social constructionist point of view, the self is a product of culture and society. Bruner (1990) sees the self as "the sum and swarm of participations in social life". Thus the type of society will influence (even determine) the self.

As people live their lives they are continually making

themselves as characters or personalities through the ways in which they reconcile and work with the raw materials of their social situation (Wetherell 1996a p305).

Gergen (1991) sees the condition of "multiphrenia" being at the heart of the "post-modern self". This is a "new constellation of feelings and sensibilities, a new pattern of self-consciousness involving the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments" (pp73-4). What happens in practice is that the self becomes "an open slate...on which persons may inscribe, erase, and rewrite their identities as the ever-shifting, ever-expanding, and incoherent networks of relationships invites or permits" (p228).

Gergen (2000) expands on this aspect of the "post-modern self". Individuals are "fractionated beings" because of:

- a) "Polyvocality" - "the plethora of conflicting information and opinion".
- b) Plasticity - rapid change and throwaway relationships, which leave the inner life as a luxury.
- c) Repetition - individuals echo the media; eg: saying "I love you" to someone comes from romantic novels.
- d) Transcience - many and varied roles.

The key notions, then, are uncertainty and change (Stevens and Wetherall 1996).

For some writers, this experience is negative or even pathological: today's self is "a mixture of disillusionment, boredom, confusion and celebration" (Thomas 1996). Frosh (1991) sees "narcissistic personality disorders" as a direct result of "post-modern society". These are a product of ego defence mechanisms that over-evaluate a self that is threatened by the insecurity of the "post-modern".

Gottschalk (2000) takes the idea of the "post-modern self" being one of pathology further:

post-modern selfhood proceeds across a landscape constantly radiating with 'low-level fear' and saturated by compelling media voices which obsessively recite stories of permanent catastrophe, random brutality, and constant dissatisfaction (p37).

Thus "insanity" can be seen as a normal response to "post-modern society". Gottschalk lists the

characteristics of "post-modern society", along with "low-level fear", that "normalise, celebrate, and make acceptable psychosocial dispositions that ...are fundamentally unhealthy" (p38):

a) "Telephrenic maps" - the intrusion of the media into the self, and the construction of reality through the camera.

b) "Tense ambivalence" - for example, borderline dispositions, which "oscillate between complete indifference and passionate involvement" (pp28-9). DSM IV provides the label for such behaviour as "borderline personality disorder".

Borderline patients often struggle to maintain coherence in their selves against forces of excessive splitting of aspects of reality. It may be that their selves have already begun to collapse (Thomas 1996 p328).

c) "Reasonable suspicion" (or even paranoia in some cases).

d) "So fast so numb" - gratuitous images of death and dying. Writers have called this "necrophilic television" or the "pornography of dying".

e) "Sociopathic" characteristics including caring for the self only.

Social Construction of Mental Illness

From a social constructionist viewpoint, mental disorders are not biological phenomena, but are narratives and discourses that society gives individuals to label their behaviour, particularly if it is different to the majority.

The reason why the biological view of psychiatry is dominant is because of the vested interests (eg: funding available for biological research) (Fee 2000). Mental illness is a discourse: "the deepest realms of somatic sensation and psychological suffering are intertwined with the technologies, knowledges, and stories of the culture" (Fee 2000 p2). That is not to say that individuals do not experience or suffer from the "symptoms". It is the labelling of the "symptoms", and their reification through the classification systems like DSM IV and ICD 10.

Scott (1999) has applied this idea to understanding "multiple personalities" as a narrative from the resources available when their abuse experiences are being denied.

Adult survivors of ritual abuse remembering and talking about their abuse ..can be seen to be engaging in a process of bringing information about one hidden reality into the wider society. This wider society largely refuses to acknowledge or accept the truth of their experience. A multiple self appears to allow the incommensurability of the two realities to be tolerated in the face of denial and disbelief (pp456-7).

EATING DISORDERS ³

For social constructionists, discourses come to dominant, and these set the agenda for "taken-for-granted" reality. In particular, Hepworth (1999) looks at the discourses that conceptualise anorexia nervosa as psychopathology.

Discourses involve practices that position the subjects of the diagnosis anorexia nervosa in particular ways and in turn reproduce dominant ideas about the phenomenon. In the case of anorexia nervosa particular discourses coalesced during the late 19th century to produce a set of statements and practices that later established medicine, psychiatry and psychology as having the capacity both to explain the loss of appetite in women and to intervene in specific ways to change their behaviour (p3).

³ This section is an extract from Brewer (2001d).

What this means in practice is that it is only recently that anorexia nervosa has been seen as an illness. In the 12th and 13th centuries, women who starved themselves were viewed as "saint-like" because of their fasting.

Hepworth (1999) also highlights that modern discourses:

isolate the body from the different meanings of food and eating that was once common in pre-modern times. Talk about the flavours and pleasures of food and eating scarcely exists, or largely constructed through discourses of health and disease.. Diet has become a dominant discourse about food, particularly through its relationship with health gains, and the practice of dieting to achieve a socially desirable thin body. The discourse of diet constructs food choice and experiences of eating through these dominant messages (p108).

INTERNALISATION OF THE EXTERNAL

It is important to emphasise that for social constructionists, the self is a product of social change, structures and institutions in society. Thus if society is undergoing changes, so will the self of that society's inhabitants.

A number of writers talk about "post-modernity" as summarising the recent changes in Western societies. The characteristics of "post-modernity" vary between writers, but they include a loss of faith in traditional institutions (like progress through science), a greater complexity of society, increasing technologies for communication and travel, the multiplicity of possibilities, and the rise of relativism (Stevens and Wetherell 1996).

A key characteristic is fragmentation, and, I would argue, contradictory messages. These contradictory messages can be seen as manifest in the self as eating disorders, particularly bulimia with its binge-purge or binge-starve cycles. The social messages are most contradictory for women, who must now be the "perfect mother" and the "perfect worker"; able to care for others, yet be independent to concentrate on her needs. To indulge herself but at the same time to have the "perfect figure". Not only are the messages contradictory, but they are unobtainable (eg: "perfect figure").

Malkin et al (1999) reported a content analysis of the cover page of 21 women's and men's magazines. 78% of the women's magazines (and none of the men's) had

messages about bodily appearance. 25% of the women's cover pages had conflicting messages compared to none of the men's. The common messages for women's magazines were diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery.

Ferguson (1983) compared three British magazines over 30 years after World War II: "Woman", "Woman's Own", and "Woman's Weekly". The later magazines clearly present contradictory messages of women represented as caring and nurturant of others (ie: family), yet free to nurture and develop their own needs and wishes. Generally images in magazines present women in polarised ways; eg: virginal, innocent and pure, versus sexually experienced and seductive (Morant 1997).

The discourse of dieting also exists hand in hand with the loss of self control and enticement.

Cakes, ice cream and chocolate have become contemporary icons of media campaigns for 'luxury foods' and described as being 'irresistible', 'indulgent', and 'naughty'. These foods are presented as enticing the consumer, and with which the consumer can entice others, such as the practice of men buying chocolates for women (Hepworth 1999 p110).

But women must both resist and succumb simultaneously.

Further Reading

Much of the material here comes from Brewer (2001e), which also covers social constructionism applied to emotions, racism, gender, and aggression.

The key text which introduces the main principles of social constructionism is Potter and Wetherell (1987). This is quite technical. It gives full details of the social construction explanation of the self. A full overview of the place of social constructionism in the history of ideas, and the many variations within social constructionism is found in Burr (1995). A very technical discussion of issues is Ibanez and Iniquez (1997). While Gergen and Gergen (2003) is a collection of "key papers" on social constructionism.

More readable and introductory examinations of the issues and principles of social constructionism are Wetherell and Maybin (1996), and Wetherell (1996a).

The principles of discursive psychology are described in introductory form in Potter (1996).

Banister et al (1994) is an excellent introduction, and handbook with examples, to qualitative methods.

The social constructionist explanation of racism is outlined in Wetherell (1996b), and explored in detail in Wetherell and Potter (1992). The latter is quite technical in its discourse analysis.

The social construction of memory (discursive memory) is introduced "Psychology Teachers Update" no.1 (Brewer 2002b).

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